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ABSTRACT

The forebears of writing "in" and "across" the disciplines are such historical figures as Aristotle and Cicero. They believed that rhetoric contained within itself all other disciplines. Renaissance rhetoricians also insisted upon assigning a moral cross-disciplinary dimension to rhetoric while at the same time the intellectual reforms and principles of Peter Ramus were stripping invention and arrangement away from rhetoric, leaving it master only of florid and obfuscated style. Sir Francis Bacon preferred not to have the arts and sciences separated, but would have them nourish and inform one another. He drew upon Aristotle's term "invention" to show how the "across the disciplines" character of rhetoric can teach the arts and sciences how to speak to each other. Thus it is appropriate to speak of both writing "in" the disciplines and writing "across" the disciplines, for it is neither the practical character of these courses nor their interdisciplinary nature that are their strengths, but only the two taken together, engendering inevitably the ethical, moral, and political questions and imperatives that should be at the core of any education. Three principles should guide current cross-disciplinary writing programs: (1) that writing promotes learning; (2) that writing is a complex developmental process; and (3) that a full universe of discourse must include a broad range of writing functions and audiences. (HTH)

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WRITING IN AND ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES:

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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Writing In and Across the Disciplines:

The Historical Background

No one seems to be bothered by what appears to be a contradiction in the terms college English teachers and others use to describe those writing courses which are designed to serve particular disciplines or subject matters and are taught either in or outside of English departments. To English Departments, faculty members in other disciplines, and to most university administrators, the expressions Writing-In-the Disciplines and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum describe pretty much the same thing, countervailing prepositions not withstanding. For once, the contradictory nature of these terms does not stem from bureaucratic duplicity, academic politics, or old-fashioned bungling but rather from the comprehensiveness of the intellectual and pedagogical endeavors that has evolved from the simple admission by English Departments that writing belongs to all students, all disciplines, and all occasions. The paradox of teaching courses that are simultaneously in and across the disciplines is just the most recent reflection of a division in the teaching of literacy that has persisted since classical times. When we talk about current programs in writing in and across the disciplines, we ordinarily cite the work of a number of contemporary scholars, researchers and teachers: Piagett, Britton, Moffet, Shaughnessy, Kinneavy, Bruffee, Fader, Maimon, but the real forebears of the movement are even more familiar: Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Erasmus, Vives, and Bacon, to name but half a dozen. It is to them that we can look for an historical explanation and defense of programs that

claim to be at one and the same time in and across the disciplines.

If we understand by the term "rhetoric" no more than Aristotle's precisely limited art of "discovering the available means of persuasion in a given case," we find that by the 4th century B.C. oral speech--and by implication--written discourse, is already tied to those professions which require a verbally-managed movement of the will: the law and government. This civil character of much of classical rhetoric is evident to us in the endless legal or deliberative cases presented as examples in Cicero, or in the detailed educational advice provided by Quintilian. Later in 427 A.D. when Augustine, finishing up his De Doctrina Christiana, addresses the question of what role rhetoric will play in the newly-Christian era where conversion is supposedly effected not by the suasion of enthymenes but by the grace of God, he, unlike St. Jerome, finds common ground between Cicero and St. Paul and speaks like Quintilian of the moral imperative of using the pagan art for practical purposes:

> For since by means of the art of rhetoric both truth and falsehood are urged, who would dare to say that truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that they who wish to urge falsehoods may know how to make their listeners benevolent, or attentive, or docile in their presentation, while the defenders of truth speak so that they tire their listeners, make themselves difficult to understand and what they have to say dubious?...While

> the faculty of eloquence, which is of great value in urging either evil or justice, is in itself indifferent, why should it not be obtained for the uses of the good in the service of truth..."

The history of rhetoric in the subsequent Christian middle ages is the story of its adaption to the professional needs and uses of a God-centered feudal world. All across the European continent and in England, treatises proliferated, filled with practical rhetorical advice on how to write sermons, how to write poems, and how to write letters. Though these medieval handbooks or guides are usually regarded today as uninventive contractions of the broader, more philosophic scope of classical rhetoric, and though they sometimes seem tedious to us--merely eccentric compilations of advice reflecting peculiar interests and emphases--they no doubt proved adequate to the professional needs of a time vastly different from our own. It is often the very eccentricities that signal the pragmatic, discipline-specific nature of medieval rhetoric. The fondness, for example, that medieval authors of handbooks on letter writing have for lengthy discussions of appropriate salutations and greetings--a concern that seems to us misplaced--in fact, reflects the rigid hierarchies of status and occupation within which the medieval letter writer had to operate. The salutation--for this particular time in this particular cultural and rhetorical situation--was the most important element of persuasion, the point in the letter where the writer implicitly defined his position, needs, demands, authority, and audience, whether he were the pope reprimanding a bishop, a bishop praising a patron, a teacher

exhorting a pupil, or a son begging for money from his father, all of these situations typically addressed by the ars dictaminis.

The problem with an emphasis on writing in a particular discipline occurs then not when writers and rhetoricians attempt to serve the needs of particular disciplines in particular times, but when they begin to lose sight of the larger, potentially richer fabric of relationships (as occurred in the middle ages when the rhetorical disciplines lost the philosophical perspective of their classical antecedents), or when writing in a particular discipline is separated from all other kinds of writing or inordinately privileged, or when the logic, arrangement, and style of one discipline is imposed upon another. Strip rhetoric of professional ties or specific contexts and purposes, deny the legitimacy of writing in a discipline and the result is another Second Sophistic, Lily's Euphues, or (facetiously) contemporary literary criticism. Bacon, in The Advancement of Learning, warns aptly that "the first distemper of learning, [is] when men study words and not matter."

For an historical sense of the obverse, of what it means to write across the curriculum, we can look to some of the classical authors just discussed, as well as to a cadre of Renaissance thinkers. Conceptually, it is easy to grasp the classical notion that "Eloquence is one" since the ability to write and speak supercedes any single discipline. And so, Aristotle's great division of knowledge appropriately emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge and the processes of knowing, the very first line of the Rhetoric leaving us gasping at the boldness and simplicity of Aristotle's perception that "Rhetoric is the

counterpart of dialectic." Less philosophical but no less wise, Cicero treats eloquence as a noble and significant entity separable from any one discipline yet essential to all of them. Early in De Oratore, he explains the scarcity of distinguished orators by pointing to the difficulty of learning this one art that supercedes all others. Says Cicero, "The art of eloquence is something greater, and collected from more sciences and studies than people imagine," and hence Cicero's ideal orator--like Quintilian's--must be familiar with all arts and all sciences.

But there is another dimension to these ancient concepts of the unity of discourse. Time and again, to a degree almost embarrassing to the relativistically-conditioned modern mind, our rhetorical antecedents insist upon assigning a moral dimension to rhetoric and eloquence that cuts across every discipline and purpose. For the sixteenth century Spanish educator and thinker, Juan Luis Vives, rhetoric is "necessary for all professions," because it "controls the will." Like Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine before him, Vives emphasizes the moral character of rhetoric in words we would probably piously endorse but fear to act upon: "the more corrupt men generally are, so much the more ought the good and intelligent men to cultivate carefully the art of Rhetoric, which holds sway over the mind, so that they may lead others from misdeeds and crimes to, at least, some care for virtue," He goes on to assert that "this most powerful of arts is a part of practical wisdom,"--and I can scarcely think of a more powerful or apt rationale for extending the power of right-speaking and writing to men and women in every subject area and discipline, that

they may share in a common language of wisdom, eloquence and--one hesitates to add it in this age--virtue. Even that eminently practical English rhetorician, Thomas Wilson, recognized that the general purpose of rhetoric is to persuade men of "what [is] good, what [is] bad, and what is harmful for mankind."

Yet if we find in Vives and Wilson, and other Renaissance writers a nobly coherent and extensive view of what eloquence could be, we need to remember that this was also the age of Peter Ramus, whose intellectual reforms and principles stripped invention and arrangement away from rhetoric, leaving it master only of style--a style that grew so obfuscated and florid at times that it drove the historian of the Royal Society, Thomas Spratt, justly to declare that "eloquence ought to be banish'd out of all civil Societies." Yet Spratt's famous championing of a "close, naked, natural way of speaking," the kind of prose we in our own time continue to associate with technical and scientific writing, was neither advocated nor written by the man regarded as the model and patron saint of the Royal Society, Sir Francis Bacon. In "Of the Interpretation of Nature," Bacon, noting that the figures of rhetoric share correspondences with figures in music, moral philosophy, policy "and other knowledge," observes almost casually that here we have "one science greatly aiding to the invention and augmentation of another." Bacon, the great taxonomer, for whom rhetoric has the important duty "to apply reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will," would not have the arts and sciences separated, but rather would have them inform and nourish one another. To describe this process of intellectual augmentation, he draws upon

the one word which, from Aristotle's time, has been both the most significant and the most troublesome component of rhetoric--invention. Deny rhetoric its larger dimension, its across-the-disciplines character, its ability to teach the arts and sciences how to speak to each other, with the resultant encouragement of genius and invention, and you create a world of solipsists and specialists, teachers who are afraid to explore beyond their narrow turf, scientists who refuse to contemplate the societal consequences of their work, moralists who will not go beyond their specific texts, leaders who do not know how to lead, and citizens who don't know whom to believe or follow--all of them victimized by any ruthless managers of language able, even adept at, leaping from one dazzling falsehood to another, capable of manipulating and distorting the truths that might be obvious if only men and women would take the time and moral energy to speak intelligently to each other.

Thus it is appropriate that we speak both of writing <u>in</u> the disciplines and writing <u>across</u> the disciplines and, if it were possible we should speak the phrases simultaneously. For in the end, it is neither the practical character of these courses nor their interdisciplinary nature that we can separate out as their strengths, but only the two taken together, engendering inevitably the ethical, moral, and political questions and imperatives that should be at the core of any education. Randall Freisinger has written that three principles guide our current cross-disciplinary writing programs.

-that writing promotes learning.

-that writing is a complex developmental process.

-that a full universe of discourse must include a broad range

of writing functions and audiences.

I believe that successful programs and courses can and have been designed in accord with these principles, but that the interdisciplinary nature of any writing course is less a function of structures and curriculum than it is of (to use Vives' term) "the practical wisdom" of individual teachers entrusted with teaching writing. We have for too long been too uninformed, too petty, too territorial, and sadly, too ignorant of the history of our own discipline to appreciate the dimensions of our responsibility. Fortunately, much is changing for the better and I believe we are on the right track again. The confusion of our prepositions, in and across, may actually be testimony to our progress.